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AUTHOR Heim, Margaret; And Others
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# Sex Differences in Perceptions and Punishment of Rape

Margaret Heim, Neil M. Malamuth and Seymour Feshbach

University of California, Los Angeles

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## Abstract

Two studies examined the effects of variations of intent, outcome and pain in depictions of rape on the perceptions and punishment of rape. Numerous sex differences in perceptions were found. Females perceived more pain and tended to focus on the effects of outcome while males tended to respond more to the intent variation. Females assigned more guilt and punishment than did males, particularly when the rape was planned. In addition, contrary to findings in moral judgment literature, males punished intentional rapes less than unintentional rapes. The implications of these results for the criminal justice system are considered.

# Sex Differences in Perceptions and Punishment of Rape

Despite growing concern about rape, empirical research has been sparse. Previous studies have focussed on the impact of characteristics of a rape victim on judgments of responsibility for the rape. For instance, Jones and Aronson (1973) varied the respectability of a rape victim and found that more responsibility for the rape was attributed to the more respectable victim. In addition, based on the belief that rape of a respectable victim is more serious, the assailant of a less respectable victim was punished less severely and held less responsible than the assailant of a more respectable victim. No sex differences in ascribing guilt or sentences were found.

Smith, Keating, Hester and Mitchell (1976) varied, through the occupation of the victim and previous contact with the rapist, the likelihood that she had provoked the attack. Victims considered least likely to provoke the rape were assigned greater responsibility for the rape than the more provocative victims. However, contrary to Jones and Aronson, the assailants of the more respectable victims were not given higher sentences. Moreover, females gave higher sentences for the rape than males.

Both Jones and Aronson and Smith et al. espouse a Just World explanation for assignment of responsibility and punishment in rape. Rape, in this view, is a heinous mishap which arouses in

people a threat to their conception of a just world. People act to preserve the belief that a victim deserves his/her fate by assigning more blame to the victim of a mishap than the evidence would necessarily warrant. Moreover, according to the Just World explanation, the more severe the mishap the more the victim is blamed. Thus assignment of blame and punishment to the assailant in a very painful rape should be less than for a less painful rape.

An alternative view suggests that punishment for rape involves a moral judgment. Besides being an act of criminal violence rape violates a woman's right of consent. If rape is seen as an immoral act then the intentions of the rapist may be extremely important. Attribution theory suggests that punishment is related to the perception of intent. Adults typically punish intentional acts more than unintentional acts (Maselli and Altrocchi, 1969). In certain moral situations, however, the positive or negative effects of the act affect the assignment of punishment (Weiner, Note 1).

Two studies were conducted to explore what information people use in reacting to rape. Intent, outcome and the level of the victim's pain were varied in an erotic depiction of a violent act of sexual intercourse to examine their effects on perceptions of the act, the victim and the assailant and on the assignment of punishment and guilt. The results of these manipulations should help clarify whether people view rape as suggested by the Just World explanation, assigning punishment on the basis of pain

experienced, or whether people view rape as an immoral act using intent, and secondarily outcome, to determine the level of punishment. In addition, the possibility of sex differences in the perception of rape and assignment of punishment was examined in an attempt to resolve the discrepancy in the findings of Jones and Aronson and Smith et al.

## Study 1

### Method

Participants. In Study 1, 123 Introductory Psychology students fulfilling a course requirement answered questions about characteristics of the rape stories.

Procedure. All participants received a booklet with one of eight versions of a violent sexual episode and a questionnaire concerning the passage. The basic passage depicted an act of sexual intercourse. The passage varied in descriptions of the amount of pain experienced by the woman (high, low), the intent of the man's actions (intentional, unintentional), and the outcome for the woman (whether or not she enjoyed the sex). An attached questionnaire asked participants to rate on five-point scales how much they identified with the victim and the assailant, the victim's enjoyment of the sex, the intensity of her sexual emotions, her pain experience, how planned the assailant's actions were, how justified he was, his physical strength, her physical strength, her resistance, their attractiveness and how dangerous

he was. Instructions to participants explained that the passages they would read were of an erotic nature and that the questionnaires should be answered with respect to the passage they read.

Results

Manipulation check. ANOVAs of responses to questions about the female's outcome, her pain experience and the intentionality of the man's actions revealed that the manipulations were effective. Positive outcome stories were seen as significantly more enjoyable for the female ($F(1,107) = 15.01$, $p < .001$) than the negative outcome stories. High pain stories were viewed as more painful ($F(1,107) = 3.03$, $p = < .08$) than low pain stories. Intentional stories were seen as more planned than unintentional stories ($F(1,107) = 60.19$, $p < .001$).

Perceptions of the act. The results reflected several sex differences in the perception of rape. Females rated the rape as more painful than did males ($F(1,107) = 3.82$, $p < .05$), particularly when the outcome was negative ($F(1,107) = 5.75$, $p < .02$). Males perceived the high pain rapes as more planned than low pain rapes whereas females did not so differentiate ($F(1,107) = 5.19$, $p < .03$). Thus, females seemed to focus more on the experience of the pain of rape, associating pain with outcome whereas males seemed to use pain cues in inferring intent. Females were more likely than males to identify with the victim ($F(1,107) = 8.7$, $p < .005$) whereas males identified more than females with the assailant ($F(1,107) =$

9.68, p .005).

Perceptions of the victim. A significant Pain x intent interaction ($F(1,107) = 4.71$, $p < .05$) indicated that the victim was viewed as most attractive in the low pain intentional rapes and least attractive in the high pain intentional rapes. In addition, she was rated less attractive in the negative outcome intentional condition than the positive outcome intentional condition ($F(1,107) = 6.03$, $p < .02$), particularly by females ($F(1,107) = 4.25$, $p < .05$). Thus, in planned rapes with unpleasant consequences (high pain or negative outcome), the victim was considered less attractive.

Resistance. The victim was seen as resisting more in general in the intentional stories than the unintentional stories ($F(1,107) = 10.45$, $p < .002$). However, this difference does not hold for females when the outcome is positive or for males when the outcome is negative ($F(1,107) = 8.02$, $p < .01$).

Perceptions of the assailant. The assailant was considered more dangerous in the intentional rapes than in the unintentional rapes ($F = 5.6$, $p < .02$). Females did not differ from males in ratings of dangerousness when the outcome was positive, but rated him more dangerous than did males when the outcome was ~~positive~~ negative ($F(1,107) = 3.93$, $p < .05$).

In ratings of how justified the assailant was, a significant

Pain x intent x outcome x sex interaction emerged ($F(1,107) = 4.14$, $p < .05$). Females did not significantly differentiate among conditions. Males, in ratings of high pain rapes, saw the positive outcome less justifiable for the intentional act but more justifiable for the unintentional act than the negative outcome.

Students identified with the assailant more when the rape was unintentional than intentional ($F(1,107) = 6.18$, $p < .02$) except when the rape was highly painful with a negative outcome ($F(1,107) = 4.29$, $p < .05$).

## Study 2

### Method

Participants. Participants in Study 2 were 150 undergraduates who answered questions about guilt and punishment during class meetings of two different psychology courses.

Procedure. The eight passages used in Study 1 were randomly distributed to participants in Study 2. An attached questionnaire asked participants on a five-point scale their opinion of the man's guilt of rape and their sentence from 0-20 years assuming he was convicted of rape. Instructions were the same as those used in Study 1.

### Results

Guilt. Females ascribed more guilt than males ($F(1,134) = 8.24$, $p < .005$). There was also a significant Intent x sex interaction ($F(1,134) = 5.02$, $p < .05$). Females ascribed more guilt

than males in the intentional condition but not in the unintentional condition.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Punishment. Results for the assignment of sentence were similar to the ascriptions of guilt. Females gave higher sentences overall than males ($F(1,134) = 17.49$, $p < .001$). In addition, a significant Intent x sex interaction ($F(1,134) = 4.09$, $p < .05$) revealed that, whereas females did not differentiately punish on the basis of intent, males gave lower sentences for intentional rapes than the unintentional rapes.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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## Conclusions

Three patterns seem to emerge from the results of these two studies. First, males and females attend to different pieces of information in a rape depiction in making judgments about the rape. Second, a clear sex difference emerges in the assignment of guilt and punishment. Third, the results suggest subtle derogation of the victim, particularly by males.

Sex differences in the perception of rape seem to revolve

around differential attention to outcome and intent. Females seem to focus more on the effects of outcome such as in their perception of more pain and danger in negative outcome rapes. Males, on the other hand, apparently focus more on the intentions of the assailant as shown by their use of pain cues to infer intent and by variation of ratings of justification based on intent. Several recent studies (Selby, Calhoun & Brock, 1977; Calhoun, Selby & Warring, 1976) have indicated that females' perceptions reflect more the perspective of the victim whereas males' perceptions reflect the assailant's perspective. Sex differences in identification with the victim and assailant in the present study support this explanation for the differential perceptions of males and females about rape.

The sex differences in perceptions of the act may in part explain the sex differences in assignment of guilt and punishment. Males focus on intent carries over into their assignment of punishment. Females assignment of punishment seems related to their overall, strong, more negative reactions to rape.

Females are more punitive than males, particularly when the rape is planned. Given that the intentional rapist is considered more dangerous, and females more than males tend to identify with the victim, females may understandably be reacting in their own self interest.

Such sex differences have implications for the criminal justice system. Males who are on juries may tend to discount the severity of the rape and be less likely to find the rapist guilty. Moreover, even if the rapist is convicted, he may be only lightly punished given that most judges are males.

The results concerning perceptions of the victim's attractiveness and level of resistance imply derogation of the victim that stems from Just World processes. The victim was rated least attractive in the most severe rapes, intentional rapes with negative outcomes. Thus, in line with a Just World explanation, the victim who suffers the worst mishap is judged most severely.

Another area in which the victim was unreasonably blamed, suggesting the operation of Just World processes, is the sex difference in perceptions of resistance. Whereas the overall rating of victim resistance was higher for the planned rapes, males rated the victim's resistance as low regardless of the assailant's intent when the outcome was negative. This finding has implications for the criminal justice system where, in a rape trial, it is necessary to determine both victim's and assailant's responsibility before assigning blame. Resistance is an important cue for judging the victim's responsibility while the assailant's intentions are important for judging his responsibility. Accordingly, results show that more resistance

was inferred in planned rapes. At times, outcome may override intention in the inference of lower levels of resistance, but reasonably, only when the outcome is positive. Hence, males' lower ratings of resistance for a negative outcome suggests they are blaming the victim via Just World processes. While it may be presumptuous to generalize from a student sample, such a view by males may in part explain a recent court decision in England where the rapist was in effect set free by a male judge even though the victim sustained injuries from resisting the rape (Los Angeles Times, 1977).

The operation of Just World processes in perceptions of the victim suggested in the present research did not extend to the assignment of guilt and punishment. Neither level of pain nor outcome directly affected the ascription of guilt or punishment. Moreover, the effect of the intent variation of males assignment of punishment was opposite to the predictions of an attributional explanation in that the planned rape was punished less than the unintentional rape. Although the present studies do not provide information for clearly understanding this effect, a few speculations are possible. One explanation is that males are reacting more sympathetically to someone who is clearly different from them and thus may need psychiatric help rather than punishment. Males may, on the other hand, be more punitive toward the unin-

tentional rape assailant with whom they were more likely to identify because his lack of control is inexcusable. The justification ratings support this explanation in that males seem unable to justify the unintentional act of rape as easily as the intentional act. Justification of intentional rape for males depends more on other factors (outcome, level of pain) than does unintentional rape which overall receives low justification. Thus males may consider more the extenuating circumstances for the intentional rape and be less likely to give high sentences. More research is needed to discover what inferences males are making from intent information that would lead to this unexpected punishment effect.

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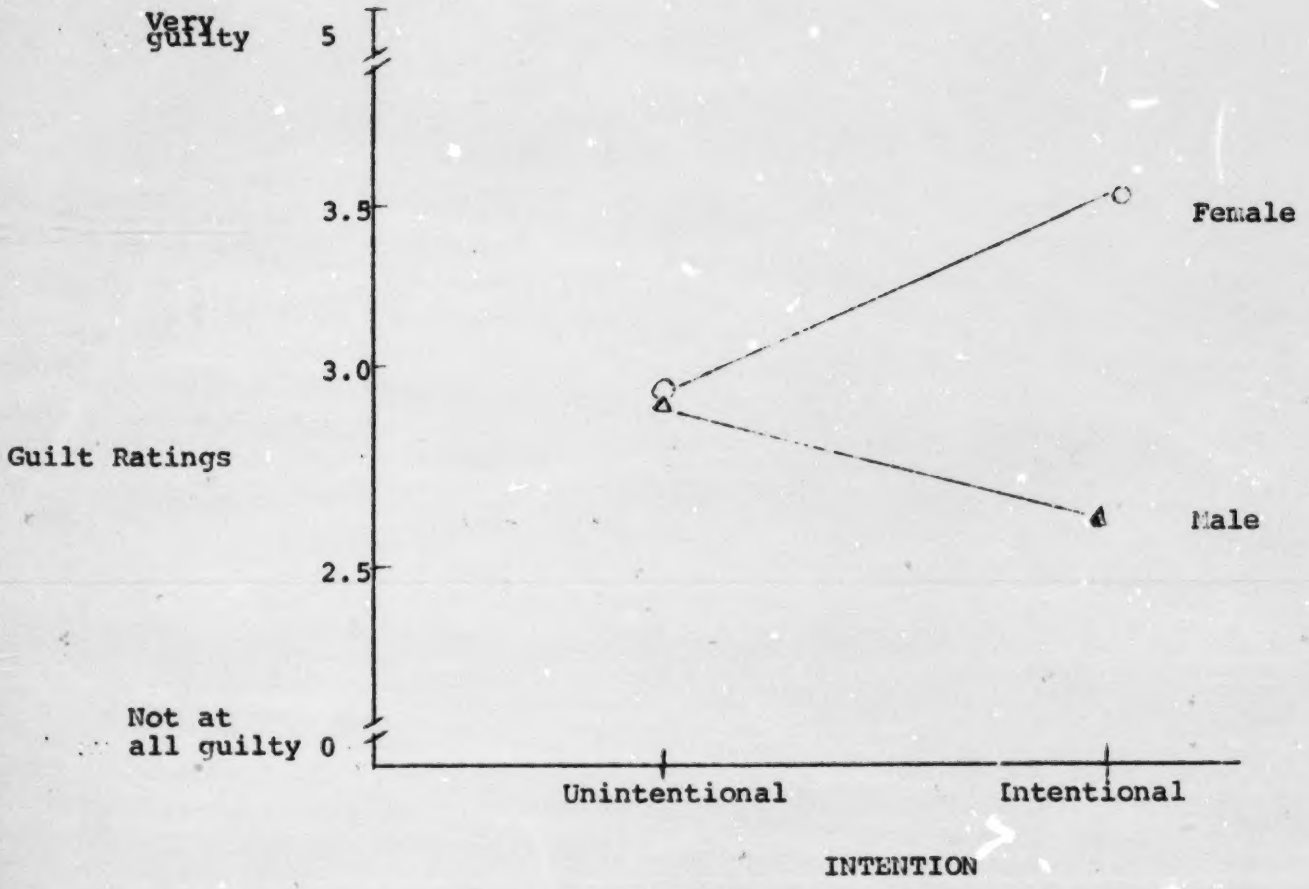


Figure 1 Male and female guilt ratings for intentional and unintentional rapes

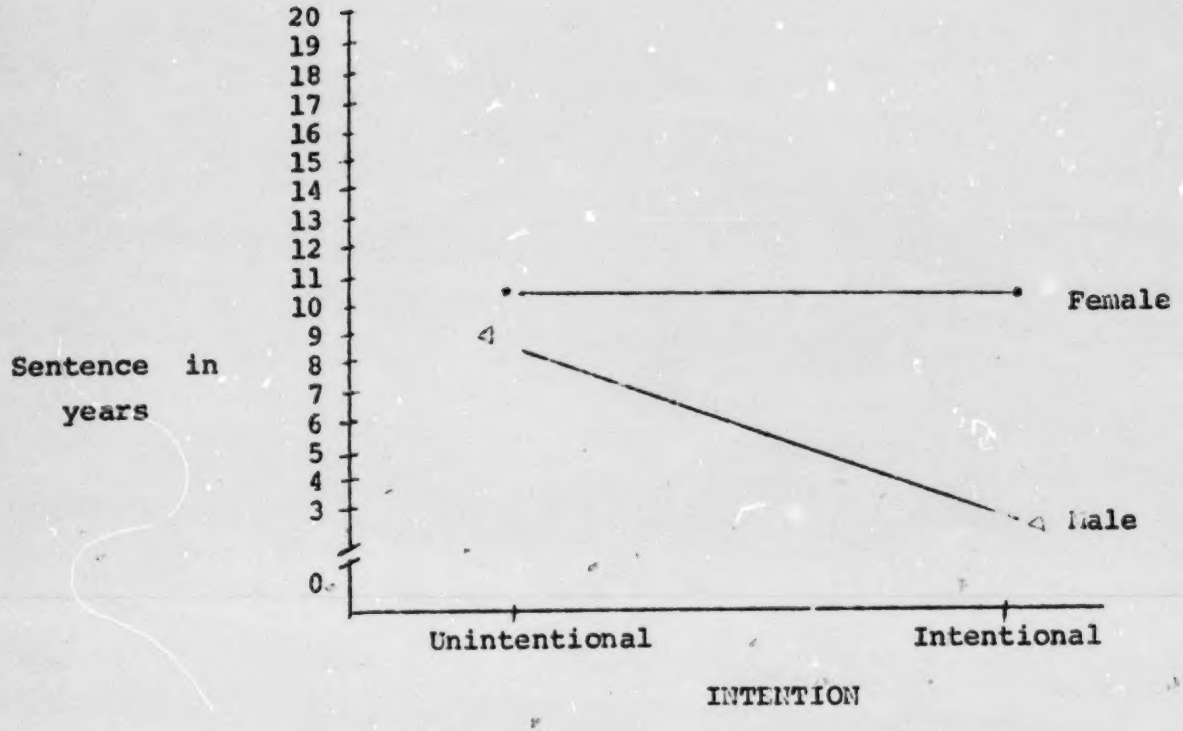


Figure 2 Male and female assignment of sentence for intentional and unintentional rapes